

Tiny typesetting unit cuts costs

I recently received this letter from a reader:

"I am the office manager in an engineering firm. One business tool that gets a lot of use here is a lettering machine. It produces narrow strips of type that we use to label schematics, make headlines for the office newsletter and reports.

"But the machine we've been using is limited to two fonts, and it's also clumsy and time-consuming to use. Compared with the products available through desktop publishing, our system is really obsolete.

"Although we have many PCs in our office, most are used for technical applications. Is there a product on the market now that's an improvement over the last generation of lettering machines, but easier to use than a desktop publishing program?"

The answer is yes.

This new tool is called Merlin Express and is produced by Varitronic Systems Inc., 300 Shelard Tower, 600 S. County Road 18, Min-



Hillel Segal

neapolis, Minn. 55426, (800) 328-0585.

The Merlin is a laptop-size device that looks like a portable computer. It weighs about 10 pounds, and it runs off batteries or an adapter.

It produces self-adhesive strips of type suitable for headlines, schematics, newsletters, whatever copy or document you're trying to draw attention to, almost effortlessly.

Here's how it works:

■ First, choose a tape cartridge, which come in several different colors.

■ Then choose a font and type size from the 20 fonts available, from standard Helvetica to a modern brush script. Merlin prints sizes from tiny 6 point — a little

smaller than regular newspaper type — to 36 point, which is the size of an average newspaper headline.

■ Next, use the keyboard to type your message and see it appear automatically on the tape. Then peel the paper backing off and affix. The message can be stored in memory and you can make changes if needed.

The Merlin Express takes about a half hour to learn to use, and its keyboard makes it much quicker — and less tedious — to operate than the old-fashioned lettering machines. Not to mention the versatility of fonts and point sizes.

On the downside, however, there are several drawbacks of which you should be aware.

First, it is much too tedious to use Merlin to produce paragraphs of typeset text. The paste-up effort would negate any efficiency you would gain from this machine.

Second, it doesn't justify copy, although you can adjust the spacing between letters to make a headline fit exactly.

Also, Merlin prints only 300 dots per inch, so some of the dots are visible in the smaller type sizes. Above the 12- or 14-point size, however, it's entirely adequate.

But despite its flaws, at \$1,495 for the basic unit, the Merlin is less expensive and a lot easier to use than a desktop publishing system for headliner-type applications. If you don't have a \$1,500 laser printer or the need for a \$500 desktop publishing program, why make that extra investment?

The bottom line: I'd recommend Merlin for offices that produce their own headlines and labels for schematics, maps, or advertising and promotional material, but that do not need to take a giant and more expensive step toward desktop publishing.

Hillel Segal's column includes evaluations of gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.